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ABSTRACT

Testing language skills is difficult, but testing writing, and the writing of students of English as a Second Language, poses two major problems. The first is making decisions about the matter of control, objectivity of the evaluation, and naturalness in the writing test. The second major problem is that, if the test is done in a way that cannot be graded objectively, it is necessary to develop a scale that makes grading as objective as possible. The ability to write involves grammatical and lexical abilities, mechanical ability, stylistic and organizational skills, and the ability to judge whether something is appropriate. Common tasks for writing tests include: (1) gap filling; (2) form completion; (3) making corrections; (4) letter writing; and (5) essay writing. Any chosen task should be evaluated for its relevance to the student's eventual use of the language. When assessing students at intermediate and advanced levels, test makers must consider the instructions, the choice of topics, the choice of tasks, and the level of difficulty and time allowed. All of these considerations must go into making a test that is appropriate for the learner, and then the test maker must attempt to ensure that marking the test, which will always be at least somewhat subjective, is as objective as possible. (SLD)

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ED 398 259

Testing Writing

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Testing each skill is uniquely difficult, but testing writing presents two particular problems. Testing writing presents two major problems. The first is making decisions about the matter of control, objectivity of the evaluation, and naturalness in the writing test. If you decide to test writing in a controlled way and in a way that can be graded objectively, you must do so in a way that does not necessarily reflect how the writing is used by the students in the real world. If, on the other hand, you test writing in a way that would reflect how the students use writing in the real world, it is difficult to have control over the writing and to evaluate the student's work objectively.

The second major problem with testing writing is, if the test is done in a way that it cannot be graded objectively, it is necessary to develop a scale that allows it to be graded as objectively as possible. How this is done is one of the great difficulties of testing writing.

Components of Writing

The ability to write involves at least six component skills. They are:

*grammatical ability. This is the ability to write English in grammatically correct sentences.
*lexical ability. The ability to choose words that are correct and used appropriately.
*mechanical ability. The ability to correctly use punctuation, spelling, capitalizaton, etc.
*stylistic skills. The ability to use sentences and paragraphs appropriately.
*organizational skills. The ability to organize written work according to the conventions of English, including the order and selection of material.
*judgements of appropriacy. The ability to make judgements about what appropriate depending on the task, the purpose of the writing, and the audience.

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Perhaps the most difficult--and most important--of these skills is the last. Native English speakers develop a sense of what is appropriate in different writing situations (though they may be taught to use specialized registers, such as academic English or business English). Registers of English range from very informal forms such as colloquialisms, slang, and jargon to standard English to more formal forms, such as the language used for business letters, legal documents, and academic papers. Writers must be aware of these differences and learn to follow the conventions of different situations. A writing test needs to take these skills into account.

Types of Writing Tasks

Gap Filling

One of the most controlled way of testing writing is gap filling. Testees are presented with a passage with blanks, and they fill in the blanks. This is a mixture of both reading and writing skills, which is sometimes a problem, because it makes it difficult to decide what the scores really mean. However, with lower level students, it might be the only reasonable test of productive ability.

Form Completion

Another controlled way of testing writing is to have the testees fill out a form, for example, an application. The advantage of such a task is that it is at least somewhat communicative, but the disadvantage is that it does not require any connected discourse or any use of language greater than lexical knowledge and a small amount of grammar.

Making Corrections

In some situations, testees are presented with a short piece of writing which has deliberate grammar, punctuation and spelling errors, and they are asked to correct the errors. While this task does related to one thing that people do when they write--editing--and it is objectively corrected, but it does not represent the writing task as a whole.

Letter Writing

Letter writing is a common task for writing tests. The stimulus for the letter may be a situation that is explained in the instructions, a letter to which the testees are instructed to respond, information given in chart or graph form that is to be summarized in the testees' letter, pictures or drawings that give information about a situation the testees are expected to write a letter about, etc. In all of these possibilities, the tester must keep in mind that the situation must be as clear as possible for the testee, unless

there is an intention to test reading and writing together. If the testee does not understand, for example, a letter that he/she is expected to respond to, it will be impossible to get a sample of writing to evaluate.

Essay Writing

Essay writing is probably one of the more common writing tasks, but it should be used carefully. If the future situation of the students will not include writing essays, the tester should carefully consider whether it is the best test of the students' writing ability.

Issues Related to Intermediate and Advanced Writing Tests

For beginners, it is often necessary to test writing indirectly, for example, by giving them very limited tasks that involve such activities as filling in blanks and which do not require them to write connected prose. However, once students get to the intermediate and advanced stages, their writing proficiency should be tested in direct ways, ways that allow students to demonstrate their ability to used connected discourse in appropriate ways, which is the way that they will use writing most in real life. The following is a list of desirable characteristics of such tests. For practical and other reasons, it may not be possible for a test to have all of these characteristics, but a teacher constructing a writing test should carefully consider the issues related to them.

Instructions

The instructions should use as few words as possible, consistent with making the writing task and situation clear, so that the testee does not spend too much time on the instructions. Definitions should be provided in the instructions, if any are necessary.

Time and length. The instructions should also indicate the time allowed for the task and any instructions related to length in number of words. It may be useful to give the students a range of the number of words, so they have an idea of what is expected, though they should be encouraged not to spend too much time counting words.

Establishing a context and communicative purpose. The test should establish a clear purpose of communicating, especially by indicating the intended reader and giving a realistic context for the reader. In making the context realistic, the teacher should keep in mind, for example, that the testee would probably not use English in writing to someone who shares his/her native language, so instructions to write a letter to a family member

would not be an appropriate use of context. Establishing the context should be done in as few words as possible, while still making the situation clear.

Choice of Topic(s)

Choosing the topic is a very important part of the writing task. If the testees find that the topic is something that they cannot respond to, they will not be able to show their writing ability. There are various approaches to choosing a topic and various issues to consider. There are not always clear answers about what type of topic is best, but the teacher should be aware of the issues involved.

Doability. The topic should be one that the testees are able to respond to. To determine this, it is necessary to pre-test the topic. A topic that sounds very reasonable in context may not work well in reality.

Knowledge. The tester must consider the background knowledge that the students have about the topic. The topic should be one that the students have an approximately equal familiarity with. If students have different levels of knowledge about a topic, the ones with greater knowledge about it will have a clear advantage in writing about the topic. One approach is to choose a topic about which the testees are equally ignorant. However, this requires giving them enough information that they can write, which may result in the testing of the reading skill as well as writing, unless the information can be presented visually. Otherwise, a topic must be chosen that the students are about equally knowledgeable about.

Motivation. The tester should consider the issue of motivation. Will the topic motivate students of the age, sex, field of study, background, etc., of the testees to write? It is often difficult to find a topic that will motivate all students equally. Some testers choose the strategy of choosing a subject that none of the students are likely to be motivated by. If none of the students are motivated, they will at least be on equal footing. The problem with this approach is that it may be difficult for students to do their best at showing their writing skill if they are not motivated by the topic.

Breadth. The topic needs to be broad enough that every testee can approach it from some angle. If the topic is too narrow, the testees have little flexibility in their approach to it and may not have an opportunity to show their writing proficiency.

Allowing students to choose topics. In some cases, students are allowed to choose from a list of topics. This raises difficulties in the reliability of the grading, so unless skill in choosing a topic is an ability being tested, this is not recommended.

Choice of Task(s)

Connected discourse. The task should require testees to write a piece of connected discourse. While there may be valid arguments for testing the writing of beginning students by having them just fill in blanks, once students are beyond the beginning stage, their writing proficiency should not be tested by having them translate from their native language or fill in blanks.

Realistic task. The task that is chosen should reflect the type of writing that the testee is required to do in the real world. If the test is for students who will be going to English-medium universities, an appropriate task would be having students write an essay on an academic topic. Tasks which the testee would not usually perform in English would not be appropriate.

Clarity. The testees should be presented with a clearly defined task that cannot easily be misinterpreted. Pre-testing helps insure that the instructions are clear and that the testees can carry out the task based on them.

Modes of discourse. The test tasks should involve a mode or modes of discourse that are appropriate to the actual writing needs of the students. If necessary, the testees should be given more than one task so that they can demonstrate their mastery of different modes of discourse. In fact, a recent trend is to evaluate students, where possible, on different types of material that they have produced over a long period of time, rather than over one piece of writing on a particular occasion.

The number of tasks. The test should involve more than one task, which will give an adequate sample of the testees' writing for evaluation. As mentioned above, different types of writing will also give a broader view of the students' writing skills.

Miscellaneous

Level of difficulty. The teacher should carefully consider the difficulty of the test. Like any other test, if a writing test presents a task that is too

easy or too difficult, if the instructions are difficult to understand, etc., the responses that testees give will not reflect their true ability, either because the task is not challenging enough for their ability or because it is so difficult that they do not know how to respond. Pretesting with a similar group is useful in determining the right level of difficulty.

Time allowed. The teacher should carefully consider the time allowed for the test. If insufficient time is allowed, the students do not have a chance to show what they can do, and particularly in the case of assessing the organization of a piece of writing. However, there may be cases, such as writing an essays for an examination, where the task that the student needs to be able to do in the real world will have restrictions on time, so in some cases, it is appropriate to 17. allow enough writing time for a reasonable performance?

Marking Tests of Writing

The marking of writing tests will always be at least somewhat subjective, but the use of descriptors for each level of the marking scheme can at least help make the marking consistent. One possibility is to make a marking scheme for the overall quality of the writing, but the problem is that, for example, the grammar can be good but the organization poor. It is perhaps more useful to have different sets of descriptors for each aspect of writing that you want to consider. You might want to have descriptors for grammatical correctness, use of vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. These categories might be weighted differently, depending on what you want to emphasize.